

A Critique of the Government of Chhattisgarh's Tourism Policy

EQUATIONS

January 2007

Similar to other state tourism policies in India, Chhattisgarh government's policy primarily focuses on tourism promotion. The vision of the policy to generate employment, produce social and communal harmony through tourism development and to ensure holistic tourism is laudable. But how this will be achieved is not clear. The policy also states the key focus area of the government to be infrastructure and institutional development, tourism product development and marketing. There is a heavy infrastructure development premise; setting up Special Tourism Zones (STZs), intensive financial incentives to the private sector and with almost no reference to regulation. If the practical policy guidelines are followed, tourism would be more exploitative than beneficial to local communities. This paper critiques the policy and focuses on the probable impact of the policy and important tourism impact issues that have not been covered.

Vision and Main Focus of the Policy

In line with most other state tourism policies in India, the government of Chhattisgarh's policy also has a clear tourism promotion focus. This is clear in the vision outlined which emphasises the rich natural and cultural heritage of the state as the basis for developing Chhattisgarh into a prime tourist destination. Interestingly, the vision states the government's overarching objectives through tourism development will be –

- To generate employment in the state
- To develop communal and social harmony through tourism

Both these aspects require closer analysis, especially the aim to use tourism as a means of fostering communal and social harmony in the State. The more detailed objectives of the policy are:

- To promote holistic tourism in the State from the economic, cultural and environmental perspectives
- Provide evidence/prove the attraction and unique experience of tourism in Chhattisgarh
- Conserve and promote the state's rich cultural heritage
- Encourage efforts of private investors to improve infrastructure in tourism
- Role of government as facilitator
- Promote new ideas in tourism like time shares, eco-tourism, adventure tourism and rural tourism
- Respect the biodiversity, intellectual property and rights of local communities

These objectives are much in line with the National Tourism Policy 2002 whose aims are similarly articulated i.e. to make tourism the engine of growth for India. However some important concepts like undertaking carrying capacity studies of destinations, ensuring that eco-tourism is more than nature-based tourism and ensures conservation, integrating community participation, encouraging industry to adopt a code of ethics in tourism and ensure sustainability are missing from the Chhattisgarh tourism policy.

Based on the vision, the policy has outlined that the key focus areas of the state government are going to be –

- Infrastructure and institutional development
- Tourism Product Development
- Marketing

The policy however clearly states that the government will support only those initiatives that ensure holistic tourism development at maintenance of environmental balance at the destination. It also stresses that the government will encourage local community partnership in tourism and elicit their support in conservation and promotion of the state's cultural heritage. The government hopes to put in place new laws to achieve the above objectives and has identified the Chhattisgarh Tourism Promotion Board as the nodal agency to implement this policy.

Questions/Critique points:

- It is clear that tourism promotion and marketing of the state as a tourist destination are the clear focus areas of the state government. While it is encouraging to note the mention of principles like sustainability, community participation and environmental conservation, the policy, it seems has mentioned these as principles without the wherewithal to ensure that these principles are implemented

- The policy makes repeated mention of local community participation in preserving and promoting the State's cultural heritage in tourism. But two important questions need to be answered to understand this objective thoroughly
 - o what is the definition of 'local communities' that is used in the policy and does it include indigenous communities and
 - o if local communities includes indigenous communities then it is illogical to assume that they will partner the government to promote their own culture and heritage as 'products' for tourism
- While the policy states that new laws will be put in place to achieve objectives, it does not address the issue of violation and non-implementation of existing laws and regulations that the tourism industry has been flouting. These include PESA, the Environmental Protection Act and the recently passed Tribal Bill.
- The setting up of the Chhattisgarh Tourism Promotion Board as the nodal agency to implement the policy is very worrisome for several reasons. Firstly, it is making a promotional body the implementer of a policy that would serve as the overall guideline on all aspects of tourism development in the State. The hope that a promotional body will think of issues on sustainability, regulation and community participation are not very high, going by precedent. Secondly, the composition of the Board has not been detailed but if, as is usually the case, it comprises mainly bureaucrats then the principles of consultative participation are defeated. Thirdly, the Board might also abuse its power and become the singly window agency for blanket and speedy of all tourism projects, bypassing local permissions and consultations.

Infrastructure Facilities and Institutional Development

The policy gives enormous focus to setting up of tourism-related infrastructure facilities and institutional development. The policy seeks to boost infrastructure development through public-private partnerships and encouraging private investment – in fact the policy highlights that tourism development will be mainly undertaken by the private sector with the government only taking responsibility for basic facilities and encouragement. Development of Special Tourism Areas (STAs) and circuits has been given special emphasis. Formulation of a long-term master plan in consultation with experts to undertake an assessment of the tourism potential of the state and possible economic gain from tourism is also on the cards. Interestingly, the policy says that the government will partner with local and district level investment agencies to ensure that greater local benefit is got from tourism. Encouragement to the local crafts and handloom has been suggested by the policy. On the lines of the National Tourism Policy 2002, the state policy also suggests for creation of "Special Tourism Fund" in coordination with State Infrastructure Corporation which would provide financial requirement to tourism projects.

The policy suggests creation of tourism committees for project development, promotion, coordination with other agencies and providing guidance to the investors. On the lines of Kerala Tourism, this policy also recommends establishing District Tourism Promotion Councils (DTPC). At the state level CTDB will act as nodal agency. There is passing reference made to work in coordination with PRIs, cooperatives and local communities, but there is no mention of specific powers and responsibilities.

Giving tourism an industry status, and providing support to tourism industry at par with other big industry is a priority for the policy. As an incentive, the government will provide a grant of upto 15%, not exceeding 20 lacs for the tourism projects in STAs. In other areas, providing land for tourism development, tax holiday, exemption of luxury and entertainment tax are some incentives to be given to private players

Improvement of road networks among tourist centers, development of road side amenities, improving airlines' services, encouraging charter services to the state, and establishing tourist information and pre paid centers are some policy recommendation. On the human resources front, policy aims to establish new commercial institutions for tourism, hotel management and hospitality courses. Training of guides at the grassroots level has been emphasized.

Questions/Critique points:

- The fierce emphasis on infrastructure development as elucidated in the Chhattisgarh tourism policy is a matter of great concern. Firstly it equates tourism development to large-scale infrastructure development which is not required or justified. While it is true that basic infrastructure like road connectivity, airport or railway station are required to facilitate the arrival and departure of visitors, these do not require investment or building of physical infrastructure on the scale that the policy has emphasised. Such a focus on physical infrastructure like highways, helipads, airports will demand more land which can be acquired either by using forest or agricultural land – in which both cases will displace people from their customary lands and traditional livelihoods. In a state like Chhattisgarh where communities are already reeling under the impact of

'development-induced displacement' tourism must not contribute to this in any manner but such a focus on infrastructure just might. Tourism might just become the excuse to sanction more road, rail, dam or other infrastructure projects that displace communities.

- The policy statement that tourism development is the primary task of the private sector and the government is nothing more than a facilitator needs to be severely critiqued. While the private sector can undoubtedly play an important role in tourism development and promotion – through investment, product development and marketing – giving it the entire responsibility of tourism development is irresponsible. Tourism has a lot more to it than bringing in tourists, product development, infrastructure and marketing – it is linked to people's livelihoods, their access to basic and customary resources, the conservation of their environment and cultures and of strengthening local rights in decision-making in development. The private sector is not the best suited to either address or mainstream these concerns as it is primarily interested in monetary gain from investment. Further, it is the responsibility of the government to ensure participatory consultation, appropriate regulation and punitive action (in case of offenders) in tourism development and it cannot rest with just taking on the role of the facilitator.
- The policy proposal to identify certain areas as exclusively meant for tourism promotion through Special Tourism Areas/Zones also needs review. As the failed initiative of the national government to set up STAs under the National Tourism Policy of 1992 indicates, such an enclavised model of tourism development cannot meet with success. Enclavisation, as national (Bekal, Goa, Mahabalipuram) and international (Cancun, Caribbean, Bahamas) case studies highlight in fact leads to greater exploitation of natural resources and people with very little benefit percolating to the local community level. Interestingly, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India is also floating the idea of setting up Special Tourism Zones (STZs) which are being opposed on the same grounds.
- The policy takes the notion of connectivity to its extreme by proposing helicopter facilities into interior inaccessible areas and creating an intensive road network between villages. The former is a ludicrous idea as interior areas are also those inhabited by tribal and indigenous populations with high ecological and social sensitivities – intruding into these areas in the name of tourism would be an ecological and social blunder. On road connectivity, while a skeletal road network would benefit tourist movement, given the high degree of militarism and presence of armed forces in the belt, building roads for tourists could potentially be used as a pretext to take troops into more interior areas – this aspect requires close analysis.
- The policy outlines intensive financial incentives for the tourism sector – which has been elevated to the level of an industry. However, examples from other states provide no empirical proof that incentive-induced tourism has been able to substantially boost the socio-economic status of communities living in tourism areas. On the contrary, the heavy incentives and subsidies granted by state governments have only made the government lose out on crucial tax revenue which it could have utilized into public services and improving social infrastructure like health, water, education and housing.
- In its plans on institutional development, the policy clearly identifies the Tourism Development Committee as the nodal agency responsible for policy and project development, decision-making, inter-departmental coordination in tourism and guidance to investors. The composition of the Board would be government officials from the respective departments and representatives of private industry. The institution of the Board with such a biased composition is itself a travesty of any genuinely participatory development process in tourism.
- The policy pays lip service to decentralization measures by saying that coordination with panchayati raj institutions and other local bodies will be sought in implementation of tourism projects. But this as well is a singular way of understanding the concept of decentralization where the local bodies are brought in only at the implementation stage and not at the policy formulation or inception stage. In fact, it is doubtful whether this tourism policy itself was formulated solely by the Department of Tourism without consultation with any other level of government or stakeholder group.

Improvement in Product Development, Delivery and Marketing:

The ambition of the state government is to make the State an unparalleled and exclusive attraction on the tourist map. The specific areas and products the policy seeks to develop are:

- Ecotourism: the policy will identify specific areas that have natural attractions and develop them into ecotourist attractions that will include wildlife areas, camping and trekking facilities. In addition the government will promote and market the state's rich biodiversity like medicinal plants by setting up 'herbal gardens' and promoting ayurveda resorts and yoga.

- Ethnic tourism: the policy will attempt at showcasing the state's rich cultural heritage and monuments which will be integrated into the ecotourism circuit. Promotion of rural arts, crafts and handloom will also help improve local employment. The proper and scientific upkeep of historical and archaeological monuments will also be undertaken.
- To promote the cultural heritage of the State, regular fairs and festivals will be organised to attract tourists – the setting up of a 'Raipur Haat' is on the cards that will not only promote and market rural arts and crafts but also help young artistes in reviving old lost art forms.
- Adventure tourism: The policy will develop adventure activities like trekking, mountaineering, boating, rafting, bungee jumping and train local youth to guide tourists in these activities. Specific areas like the Mahanadi River, and dam sites like the Gangarel, Madamsilli and Kodar dam sites have been identified for this.
- Pilgrim Tourism: The policy seeks to promote Hindu and Buddhist pilgrim circuits and develop facilities like dharamshalas for pilgrims.
- Business and entertainment Tourism: To boost business tourism, the government will set up conference halls with international standard facilities to host corporate events. The facilities will include hotels, entertainment parks, multiplexes, health spas, shopping centres and golf courses.

Questions/Critique points:

- Ecotourism: it has come to be increasingly accepted even internationally that the term 'ecotourism' has come to be abused by the tourism industry to green wash mainstream mass tourism activities and pass them off as being environmentally safe. In reality, ecotourism has exposed the world's most sensitive ecological and social zones to intrusion by tourists and tour operators not only endangering the biodiversity of the region but displacing indigenous communities. Even in India, the National Tourism Policy recognized in 2002 that ecotourism is not mere 'nature tourism' – tourism in green areas – but has to mainstream conservation and benefit sharing principles. Despite this, the national and state governments have pursued ecotourism relentlessly in the Northeast, central belt, coastal areas and even the Andaman Islands.
- Ethnic tourism – showcasing culture – commodification – not respecting local cultures and lifestyles
- Adventure tourism – requires high physical infrastructure support – noisy – could have high potential adverse environmental impacts – especially rafting and trekking of left unregulated
- Pilgrim tourism – with the ruling BJP in power – is the government using tourism to promote a political religious philosophy? Case of Amarnath and Haj
- Business and Entertainment tourism: makes little sense in the context of Chhattisgarh with its high forest cover and indigenous population – usually left for metros and big cities which are already economic hubs – luxury hotels – huge water consumption – conferences – large numbers – where is the carrying capacity – golf courses and multiplexes – resource usage like land, power and water – noise pollution and what about waste management?

Overall Additional Critique Points:

- Little or negligible mention of regulation of tourism – either in the nature of areas that will be opened up or the number of tourists who will be permitted in certain areas.
- The policy talks of undertaking research and assessment of the tourism potential of the state, trends and patterns of international and domestic tourism and tourism demand analysis but does not indicate the necessity to undertake carrying capacity or impact analysis studies.
- Local community participation has been incorporated merely for making the policy sound good and politically correct – no operational guidelines on how this is going to be achieved or where communities decisions on whether to go ahead with or oppose tourism have been indicated.
- The specific role of women in tourism has been ignored and by the same argument the specific impacts that unregulated tourism can have on women, children and indigenous communities has not been addressed.

You may reproduce this paper/publication in whole or in part for educational, advocacy or not-for-profit purposes. We would appreciate acknowledging EQUATIONS as the source and letting us know of the use.

Contact us

info@equitabletourism.org

+91-80-2545-7607 / 2545-7659

EQUATIONS, # 415, 2C-Cross, 4th Main, OMBR Layout, Banaswadi, Bangalore 560043, India

www.equitabletourism.org